(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP) **JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Amy Alznauer has been busy. This past April, she released *The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity*, a picture book biography of the Indian mathematics genius Ramanujan. And this week, she’s releasing another picture book biography of Flannery O’Connor, a writer you may have heard mentioned before on this podcast. That one is called *The Strange Birds of Flannery O’Connor*.

(MUSIC STARTS TO FADE)

**JR:** Amy Alznauer teaches calculus and number theory classes at Northwestern University, she’s writer in residence at St. Gregory the Great, a Catholic church in Chicago… oh, and she’s curating an exhibit of Flannery O’Connor’s juvenilia as part of a larger exhibit of O’Connor’s life at Emory University in Atlanta. We had a lot to talk about.

Hey, Amy Alznauer, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast today!

**AMY ALZNAUER:** Well, thank you so much for having me! I’m really thrilled to be here.

**JR:** I am really excited about your picture book that is coming — actually, the week this episode airs will be the release week of *The Strange Birds of Flannery O’Connor*. Did I get that title right?

**AA:** Yes, you did, that’s exactly right. A long time ago it used to be called *Flannery and the Peacock*, but at some point I hit upon *The Strange Birds of Flannery O’Connor*, which I like much more.

**JR:** Yeah, I do too! How did you end up — why are you writing about birds, Flannery O’Connor’s birds?

**AA:** So it started for me years ago, I set myself to the task — I think I was actually preparing for a panel I was going to be on, and I read every last word — published word — of Flannery O’Connor’s in a short period of time, which is quite an intense experience. But of course I came across her beautiful essay on King of the Birds where she details this childhood quest that she was on. And so even though she doesn’t spell it out in this essay, to me, um… the childhood quest she was on to find the strangest, most stunning, beautiful bird she could find was really a parallel quest to her writerly quest.

And both of them began in childhood, which I didn’t know at the time, but she was also already on that path to becoming a writer when she was a kid. So as I — well, then when I visited the archives and I realized much more deeply how much of a presence birds were in her life as a child and in her imaginative life and her physical life, um, I thought now this is exactly that thing you need to look for. That object in the concrete, as Flannery would say, that would point to something in the invisible realm, right? That quest to find the birds was the thing that would point to that quest to become a writer.

**JR:** What did you find in the archives that was more birdish than, say, *The Habit of Being*?

**AA:** (laughs) Well, I wouldn’t say it was *more* birdish. I think the thing for me was that… the thing that’s so stunning when you go to the archives and so delightful is you see online that there’s these folders of juvenilia and you have no idea what you’re going to find.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**AA:** You know, it’s just gonna be a scattered sketch or just a little record that a parent wrote. But instead you find folder after folder stuffed with her creations from childhood. And there’s sketches, there’s little stories, there’s endless cards that she wrote to people, and birds factor into this from her earliest age. So there’s this little sketch — it’s the only unique sketch that’s held at GCSU, and my guess is that it was tucked in a book because they hold her writings, not everything else. But anyway, there’s this little sketch she drew of a stick figure child wearing a hat, and the child is flying. And there’s a turkey that’s on the ground. And to me this was just — and it was very special drawing in their family, because her father carried this particular drawing in his wallet wherever he went. And so to me that was sort of this relic from her earliest imagination where she saw herself as a bird. And she even gets to that in her essay “King of the Birds,” where in the end she has this dream where she was a peacock?

**JR:** Oh yeah.

**AA:** And so I think there was a merging in her own imagination from a very young age of herself with birds. And so I just found all of that so compelling and it gave me this sort of new way — symbolism between the birds of the stories and her.

**JR:** Yeah. Um, okay, can you work out some of that symbolism here for me of the birds and the writing?

**AA:** (laughs) Well, okay, so she saw herself as a misfit child, right? As a strange child. And um, and of course then her writing is all about those sorts of figures, and she was attracted to this very quality in birds. It wasn’t just any old bird she was interested in. She was interested in strange birds.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** And I think she ends that essay by saying, um, that she has this event that marked her for life, which was the news people coming down and taking this little film of her with her backwards walking birds. Have you seen that film?

**JR:** Yeah. And I need to link to that in the notes for this.

**AA:** Yeah. No, it’s so charming. But the bird didn’t actually perform for her, so they ended up doing this camera trick with rolling it backwards.

**JR:** Yeah, I know I hate that.

**AA:** (laughs) I know, it was silly.

**JR:** But I just looked at that movie right before we got on this call, and I had forgotten that you actually see little Flannery O’Connor — or, little Mary.

**AA:** Yeah, little Mary. Yeah, it’s lovely. But I think one of the things she was trying to say when she said that this marked her for life… it wasn’t just the strangeness of the birds. But what really amazed her was that it got the attention of other people. And so she thought there’s something in strangeness that is important, right?

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** That is important because it makes people sit up and look. It makes people react. And I think if you — you notice in the essay by the end of it, of course she loves to stare at the birds herself, right? So she’s having her own private reaction, but she loves to see other people react to them.

**JR:** Yeah…

**AA:** And I think for her that was as much a part of it as anything else. She was a student of the world around her, but in particular, the world of people and how they interacted with the world around them. So to see people have the various reactions of anger or awe or dismissal… I mean, all of that was fascinating ot her. so I think in birds you can see… what’s really interesting to me when I’m writing about a child, because this is a firm belief I have is that the child is already the person they’re going to eventually become. So you’re not seeking out a stranger when you’re looking in the archives. You’re seeking out that person that you maybe are already acquainted with in their writing, but you’re asking how did their early imagination form and lead them to this? So when I see her reacting to birds and loving birds and writing birds and writing about people’s reactions to birds, I am seeing her imagination taking shape.

**JR:** Yeah. Um… I love… any little clue about her childhood is so fascinating. You know, in the letters and in the biographies. But you’re right, it feels like it’s the same person, but just a little version of it.

**AA:** Exactly! And the photographs of her… I mean, you see her personality in full bloom when she is little. You know, you can see it in her face, you can see her wry look, her sort of level gaze…

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** Her brilliant… all of it! I mean, it’s there. It’s beautiful.

**JR:** Can you tell a story or two about her childhood?

**AA:** Well… so the thing I’m obsessed with right now, and it actually took me two trips to the archives to really flesh out how marvelous this is, but there’s all of these little books that she made. And she had this statement in one of her journals from when she was 14, she said, “I realize that I need to bring literature into being.” And for her that became both a literal task in the task of writing, but also the task of creating the books. So she was a book creator. She tied her little books together with ribbon. She actually hand bound them with wire.

**JR:** Oh wow.

**AA:** So she coiled copper wire… I don’t even know how she would have done this, because to me it’s so… like, have you ever had a spiral bound thing come unbound and try to feed it back in?

**JR:** Yeah.

**AA:** It’s impossible! (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** But she actually created spiral bound books. But the thing that she created when she was 15 — it was the year her father died — was this book called *Mistaken Identity*, which is about her goose named Herman. They all named it Herman, and then Herman laid 7 eggs.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** So it turns out that Herman was Henrietta. So this story is such a beautiful, funny story in rhyme, and it also is such a beautiful metaphor for this idea of mistaken identity and that what is true is hidden and then emerges.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**AA:** And the egg becomes this beautiful, literal symbol of that thing in the concrete that points to that thing in the distance. So I’m just obsessed with this book. But what I found when I went back to the archives, I actually found these letters that she wrote to publishers to try to get them published.

**JR:** As a teenager?

**AA:** As a teenager. At fifteen.

**JR:** Really.

**AA:** So she— the first one she sent to McMillan, and they turned it down, and this obviously annoyed her. So the original inscription was, “To all nice geese” — the original dedication — and then she changes it to, “This is for all highly intelligent adults and precocious children.”

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** I just love it. So then she changes it, and then she writes this letter to Viking, and she says, “This is NOT children’s literature.” And then her P.S. is, “I’ve seen worse published.”

**JR:** (laughs) That’s amazing!

**AA:** Anyway, that’s her at fifteen, right?

**JR:** That’s so funny.

**AA:** It shows this outgrowth of all of these stories she wrote about birds. Like, even back in grammar school her teacher told her that she was sick and tired of all these stories of ducks and geese, and she didn’t want to see another one of them. (laughs)

**JR:** In home ec, she made clothes — when she was supposed to make clothes, she used to make clothes for ducks and —

**AA:** Herman, the star of *Mistaken Identity*, was a model in a drawing class. she brought him in so everybody could draw him.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** (laughs) So yeah, she always had her birds.

**JR:** Oh, that’s great. So what are you doing — *Mistaken Identity*, you are somehow editing that?

**AA:** I am editing that. We don’t have a publisher yet. So I’m just hoping that we’ll have a publisher for it. The Flannery O’Connor estate is very much in favor of bringing this to publication, so we just need to find a publisher. I think it will be published. So I’m editing that, which means I’m writing an introduction or an afterword, whatever the case may be. But we already have a blessing from Flannery O’Connor herself, because she obviously wanted it published.

**JR:** Thats right! Yeah. Okay, so you are curating an exhibit at Emory… tell me about that.

**AA:** Yes. So it’s really grown into quite a big thing. Um, so here’s — so several years ago now, when I was working on this book, I thought other people need to see this. Like, anytime I’ve mentioned it to somebody, they’re just fascinated by the idea of Flannery O’Connor as a child and all these creations. And there’s so much! I really will have to choose what to put out there, but I thought people need to see this. People will need to see this.

My original idea was to call it Imagining Flannery, and that sort of had a double meaning: Flannery as an imagining being, but then also other people imagining Flannery. So it was gonna be a dual exhibit fo the art of Ping Zhu, who is the illustrator for my book, um, imagining Flannery, and then Flannery herself as an imagining being. But now Emory has decided that they want to do an all out, show stopping Flannery O’Connor exhibit, and so they’re making it into a much bigger thing. So I sort of have the juvenilia piece of it, and they’re also probably pairing it with the art of Benny Andrews, who was an African-American artist who illustrated this, what they call elephantine edition, this giant edition of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. It’s a *stunning* book. It’s a big red book… I actually had to stand on a ladder to photograph it for my own notes.

**JR:** Really!

**AA:** But it’s a beautiful thing, and he wrote a beautiful essay about Flannery O’Connor and race and his own relationship to it, and why he decided as an African-American man to illustrate her work. So currently, that is part of the exhibit. So it’s gonna be fascinating, (laughs) it really is! I can’t wait til it happens.

**JR:** That’s amazing, so… I’ve never even heard of this edition. Is it…

**AA:** Yeah… it’s not well known.

**JR:** When did it come out?

**AA:** (laughs) It’s like this… I’m sure it’s like hundreds of dollars to buy this book. It’s gigantic.

**JR:** Yeah. Okay. So when is this exhibit going to open?

**AA:** Well, you know this was all planned before the current crisis. It was planned for 2021 (clears throat), but I wouldn’t be surprised if that got bumped a little forward just because everything is moving a little bit more slowly. And I think we have all of those lead time, so we wouldn’t want to schedule it until people are actually able to attend an exhibit. So I think this will be a work in progress, and we will see how things turn out. So… you know.

**JR:** Okay, so in this juvenilia exhibit that you’re curating, what kind of things are going to be in there? Besides written and drawn things — I’m fascinated with that too — but what else, what other kind of things do you have in there?

**AA:** Besides written and drawn, that’s pretty much it.

**JR:** Okay.

**AA:** There’s so much stuff… there’s so much, um… I guess there are some physical objects, but that’s really more at Savannah. There’s the objects from her childhood. And I would, now that you mentioned it, I would love to include some of her little statues of birds. Because she had hundreds — she had a collection. I don’t know if you know about this, but she had a collection of little glass and ceramic birds. Like, hundreds of them.

**JR:** Really.

**AA:** Even as a teenager — so it was a childhood collection that she developed. But that really, um — since it’s an Emory-based exhibit, we’re really going out of the Emory archives. I think they’re willing to collaborate a bit with Georgia, I think they’re open to that. But right now what I’m really focused on — I sort of had it into categories — are her drawings, her little books, which are extensive. There’s so many. There’s one called *Why I Chose Heart Trouble*.

**JR:** (laughs) What?

**AA:** *How to Destroy Kittens.*

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** (laughs) So there’s so many… um… *The Great M.F. O’Connor*, I think, is one of them.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** Or, *The Priceless Works of M.F. O’Connor*! That’s what it’s called.

**JR:** Oh, that is so funny!

**AA:** Yeah, so there’s so many little books that I definitely want people to see. There’s so many photographs, and I think that’s a really important part of it. Um, so those are the main — and then the letters. She designed cards, she wrote cards, she made these little folded creations, she did so many… for Mother’s Day, for Father’s Day, for relatives, and they’re always very wry and amusing, so… (laughs)

**JR:** I love — I’ve never seen it, but I’ve heard about the little cartoon she wrote, drew, um, that says — the mother says “Hold up your head straight,” and the little girl says, “I’ve heard of somebody who died from holding his head up straight.”

**AA:** (laughs)

**JR:** You’re just a bad head, or something like that.

**AA:** That image was really important for my book, and I actually got permission from the estate to have that in the back of my book. So you’ll get to see that one.

**JR:** Ohhhhh, I’m so glad! Because I’ve never seen it. And that one’s at Emory?

**AA:** That’s at Emory, yep. And there’s similar ones. That’s not the only one. She has another one with this little family parade — I think she did that when she was nine. There’s another one she does several years later, and it’s the same parade, and it’s funny because it’s a lot more glum. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** That one’s so funny, and the sun is smiling, and in the later one the sun has lost its smile. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs) That’s great.

**AA:** Yeah.

**JR:** Okay, so you are… you’ve been very busy. Because a few weeks ago you published another book about the Indian mathematician Ramanujan.

**AA:** Yep, exact— good pronunciation too!

**JR:** Well, I watched a little video in which you talked about Ramanujan, so…

**AA:** Okay. (laughs) So, some people say RAH-ma-NOO-jun. That’s the British pronunciation.

**JR:** Oh, really.

**AA:** But it’s almost impossible for us to say it correctly because it’s four unstressed syllables the way the Tamil people say it, and I think it’s almost impossible for an English speaker to say four unstressed syllables in a row properly. So.

**JR:** I wouldn’t even want to!

**AA:** (laughs) Oh, I know, exactly!

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** Anyway! Um, yeah. So that book came out, so yes, I’ve been very busy surrounding that.

**JR:** Yeah… so tell me about Ramanujan

**AA:** So when I was a little girl, my father… I was on a trip to England with my father, and this incredible thing happened. We were there to visit another mathematician, and she just told him about these boxes of papers that were kept at Cambridge library, and she thought he might be interested because he’d written his dissertation… he’s a number theorist, so she thought, you know, it would be interesting to look through these boxes of number theory papers. So he went there, but he’d actually written his dissertation on Ramanujan, on something called the mock theta functions. And nobody in the world was thinking about them at the time, so he was really the only mathematician who was aware of this.

Ramanjan had died over 50 years before, and his mathematics had kind of faded away in the mathematics world. So anyway, he went and opened this box, and he saw before him these papers that were really in Ramanujan’s handwriting. So it was what he’d been doing as he lay dying. And we knew that it existed because he’d written one letter to his collaborator in England, J.H. Hardy, where he talked about the mock theta functions. And I love it because my father believes, and a lot of people believe, that he named the mock theta functions after the Mock Turtle in Lewis Carroll.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** As a Lewis Carroll fan I just love that. But anyway…

**JR:** Lewis Carroll was also a mathematician, right?

**AA:** Yes he was, exactly. Yeah. But anyway, so he realized he was looking at this lost notebook, and it was an incredible discovery. It was probably some of the most brilliant mathematics Ramanujan had ever done, and… so that just shaped my early imagination, and um…

**JR:** Wait a minute. When you say “that” shaped… just that story? Did mathematics shape your early imagination? What do you…

**AA:** So actually, I didn’t really like mathematics when I was little, because of how it was taught in school, I think. So there were two tracks in my mind. There was the mathematics at home, which to me was amazing and beautiful, because… I mean, I still remember my father bounding up the stairs and dancing my mother around the kitchen because he’d discovered something.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** It always gave me this sense… and we weren’t a religious family, but I think it gave me the earliest sense of there being a presence beyond the self, because he was in contact with something. And he very much believed — and there’s sort of a split in the world of mathematics, or the philosophy of mathematics that mathematics is invented vs. discovered, and my father was very much in the discovered camp.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah…

**AA:** And I think that finding of the notebook was just a beautiful, physical manifestation of that were he was discovering this mathematics. And so, as I grew up, I really did eventually fall in love with mathematics, but I think even more the writer’s take on mathematics.

**JR:** What do you mean the writer’s take of mathematics? What do you mean when you say that?

**AA:** Well, I switched to being a math major in college. I wanted to study philosophy, film, and writing. (laughs) And I took a class by a chemist that was on cultural and intellectual perspectives on science, and I fell in love with science through that? But I think it was kind of… I didn’t understand what that was. And I tried to be a chemist, and I tried to be a mathematician, and I realized at some point that I wasn’t… in love enough with the subject itself. But I loved communicating about it. Like, I loved writing about it, talking to other people about it. So I still love teaching mathematics…

**JR:** Uh huh.

**AA:** I am not a mathematician in the sense that… somebody once told me you should major in what you gossip about, and I don’t in my free time gossip about mathematics. But I do gossip about — I do gossip to some extent, but it’s more of a communicative thing. It’s more about articulating mathematics to other people.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. No, I love that idea of mathematics is something you discover.

**AA:** Yeah.

**JR:** It’s out there. It exists whether you know it or not, and the mathematician’s job is to go find it and give voice to it.

**AA:** Right. Right.

**JR:** I was reading a Wendell Berry story earlier this week…

**AA:** (laughs) I love Wendell Berry.

**JR:** Yeah… and there was somebody, I guess it was Danny… whatever his last name — Danny Branch — is out in the woods and he’s happy. And he says he realized this happiness existed outside of him, and it didn’t exist because he felt it. It was there and he came to it.

**AA:** (gasps)

**JR:** And… that sounds like what you’re talking about with mathematics, and it also feels to me like what writing feels like.

**AA:** That is really beautiful. Yeah, I’m reading *Jayber Crow* right now. I’m a huge Wendell Berry fan.

**JR:** Had you read *Jayber Crow* before?

**AA:** I hadn’t.

**JR:** Really?

**AA:** No, I hadn’t.

**JR:** Oh, I’m jealous that you’re getting to read it for the first time.

**AA:** Yeah, it’s… it’s amazing. I had a huge Wendell Berry phase when I was in high school, and then since then I’ve read a lot of his essays, and re-read *A Place on Earth* several times. But I hadn’t read… I hadn’t, unbelievably, read *Jayber Crow*.

**JR:** How about *Hannah Coulter*?

**AA:** I have read *Hannah Coulter*.

**JR:** Yeah, what a great book.

**AA:** What a great book. No, I was thinking, when you were talking earlier about writing and math, there’s another mathematician I really love, Miriam Mirzakhani, who is the only woman to ever win the Fields Medal, and she wanted to be a writer when she was little and then ended up becoming a mathematician. So she and I kind of went in opposite directions.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**AA:** But one of the things — she describes mathematics in a way that’s very writerly. She says when she’s doing mathematics, she’s assembling a cast of characters and trying to get them to talk to each other.

**JR:** Really?

**AA:** And I love that image, and it’s really affected how I think about my own writing. That you… and when I think about a cast of characters, I don’t think necessarily just about just people, but about all the objects and creatures, things you bring into communion in a story. And um… and I think about that with Flannery O’Connor and strangeness as well. When you bring this odd cast of characters together, you know, it’s… you’re creating this sort of unique moment that never could have happened at any other time.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AA:** So there’s a lot of metaphors that can span these two fields.

**JR:** Yeah. That’s something so many stories — I mean, I’m tempted to say all of them, and I’m sure I could be disproven, but it’s a matter of putting people in a room who don’t belong in the same place and then see what happens.

**AA:** Have you ever read Danny, Champion of the World by Roald Dahl?

**JR:** No.

**AA:** You have to read it!

**JR:** Why?

**AA:** Do you like Roald Dahl?

**JR:** I… have mixed feelings.

**AA:** You have mixed feelings. Well, even if you have mixed feelings, this one, I think you will be… it’s my favorite Roald Dahl by far. It’s a father and son story, and it is so… I mean, there’s a darkness to Roald Dahl that maybe isn’t… in most of his books, maybe isn’t quite redeemed. But I think this story is so beautiful. And it’s a story about this father and son… this father has this illegal habit of poaching pheasants from this private game land. And I always remember — I actually listened to this because it’s narrated beautifully. So, I know you like listening to books, so I recommend this as a book on tape.

Um, but there’s this moment at the end where Danny — Danny’s the boy — and his father are walking down the street, and his father has this iron foot because he had broken his foot earlier, and they used to put these iron things under your foot so you could walk? And so he’s walking down the street, and he’s in this place of elation, cause they’ve just caught all these pheasants by putting them to sleep, by feeding them raisins that have sleeping pills inside of them. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** It’s all crazy, right? It’s this crazy moment, he’s walking down the street, he’s waving his arms, and his iron foot is clicking on the pavement, and it’s this moonlit night. And I think that’s why you write, to get to this scene that never could have happened in any other book, and it’s definitely the climax of the story, this beautiful moment of elation. And anyway. So to me that was that moment of bringing this odd cast of characters together. The pheasants and the raisins and the strange father and this boy and the iron foot. And there they are all dancing in the street.

**JR:** Yeah, that’s great. Flannery O’Connor talks about the idea that you’re looking for an ending that is surprising but inevitable. I mean, she’s not the only person who’s talked about that. But surprising but believable… I can’t remember which phrasing she uses.

**AA:** Right.

**JR:** But… yeah. Um, okay. You told me about how you got interested in Ramanujan, but I still wanna hear a little bit about — I mean, the book isn’t about you getting interested in Ramanujan, isn’t it? It’s about him as a boy, right?

**AA:** It’s about childhood again. Because I have this — I’ve written three. I didn’t ever think I would write three picture book biographies. It started with the Ramanujan one, and then I just became… I was just really in love with that process of trying to discover the adult within the child?

**JR:** Mmhm.

**AA:** And so I think that was what led me to these other stories. But that’s really what I’m trying to do. I’m asking myself the question, he was this brilliant genius, this brilliant mathematician, but what would a boy be like who ended up being that person? And with him there wasn’t a lot to go on, so I ended up going to India, walking around in his childhood home. There was this huge temple that he lived on, and he was a very devout Hindu. And he believed that — from before he was born, there was this prophecy that the goddess Namaghiri was going to write her thoughts on his tongue. His grandmother had this dream about him.

And throughout his life, he believed that was his source of inspiration. When he would sleep at night, he would often wake up with these ideas, and he thought that they were divinely inspired. He thought all the time about the relationship between mathematics and divinity. And believed in God… I think a lot of people see Hinduism as this polytheistic religion, but for a lot of people it is sort of both?

**JR:** Huh!

**AA:** At the heart of their religion, they really believe in one god, one creator. Um, but then they see these infinite manifestations. So he would actually associate numbers with that. Like, zero was nothing. One was God, was the unity of God. Infinity was the manifestations of God. So um… so anyway, I really wanted to get into his boyhood, and one of the things that really helped me — there’s two questions that someone thought to write down in their family record. And the first is, who was the first man in the world — this was his question as a little, little boy. Who was the first man in teh world, and what is the distance between clouds?

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** Those are such beautiful questions! And I thought, now this is the same mind, so you have to go in with that belief. This boy is going to become that adult person, so this is the same mind as a little boy. Why those questions, and why did they write them down? And so I thought these are questions about smallness and largeness, and those are the same questions that would eventually obsess his mind with mathematics. So he was a number theorist, and he was interested in the infinitesimally small and the infinitely big. So that was the kind of symbolic association I made, like I did with the birds in O’Connor’s stories.

**JR:** No, that’s great.

**AA:** Yeah.

**JR:** I ran across, probably on your Twitter feed or something, that you have a quotation from Katherine Paterson over your desk.

**AA:** Yes… well, do you know about the Festival of Faith and Writing?

**JR:** Mmhm.

**AA:** Okay, so years ago — years, years, years ago — I went to that, and she was actually the keynote speaker. And they put out these beautiful posters. So um… I can actually read it to you ‘cause I’m looking at it. She says, “I want to become a spy like Joshua and Caleb. I have crossed the river and tangled with a few giants, but I want to go back and say to those who are hesitating, don’t be afraid to cross over. The Promised Land is worth possessing, and we are not alone. I want to be a spy for hope.”

So, I love that for so many reasons. One, I feel like it’s about being a writer. So, it’s about that task and what it feels like, and actually in the rest of her talk, she talks about wrestling with the angel.

**JR:** Hmm.

**AA:** So I thought that’s such a beautiful way of thinking about writing. It’s this wrestling with the angel. It shows both the difficulty of it, and the reward of it, I guess, or the pleasure that’s inherent in it. But she actually wrote that quotation in a longer essay that she wrote about whether or not she writes for children. And she said, no, I don’t write for children. I write for myself. Then she said, no that’s not right. I write for my children, but I also write for all of the children. And she was thinking about the children of Israel.

**JR:** Hmm.

**AA:** And so this was actually this biblical quote where they were sending out scouts to the Promised Land. And some of them said, no, we can’t go. And others came back and said, no, we can. We can go. It’s worth possessing the Promised Land. Um, and so she was saying that we’re all children, and I think that actually relates to O’Connor. Because O’Connor talks a lot about children in her letters and why she uses children so much in her fiction.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AA:** One of the statements that she says is we’re all children in the eyes of God. And she also relates that to the poor. We’re all poor in the eyes of God. So children and the poor become literal manifestations of what we all are. And I think Flannery’s always very interested — we think of her as a symbolist, someone who uses a lot of symbols, but she was very interested in the literal.

**JR:** Yeah!

**AA:** I don’t think when she’s using metaphors she ever wants to say that there’s something — that the literal thing ins’t there. The literal thing was of utmost importance to her.

**JR:** Yeah. Because she believed that the world around us is shot through with meaning, and if you just depict the world around us, what you’ve seen with your eyeballs, it can’t help but be full of symbolism.

**AA:** Yeah. Exactly. I think the way a lot of people conceive of the metaphor is there’s a literal part and then there’s the figurative part, and this one’s true, and that one’s just figurative, right? But for her, they’re both literal, they’re both true.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AA:** There’s a point int eh concrete, and there’s a point in the invisible, but they’re both literally true.

**JR:** Yeah, and the fact that she was a Catholic didn’t hurt one bit in her, you know, understanding of metaphor and symbol.

**AA:** Yeah, I’ve been thinking so much recently about why she used children. And she has this beautiful — oh yeah, here it is. Um, she has this beautiful line about children. She says, “When a child draws, he doesn’t intend to distort, but to set down exactly what he sees. And as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion.”

**JR:** Wow.

**AA:** It’s such a perplexing little thing to say. And then she later says, in that same paragraph, she talks about as an adult now, what she’s seeing — as a writer, not as an adult. As a fiction writer, she’s trying to see the lines of spiritual motion. But she thinks it’s that gaze of the child that’s so… that she wants to hold on to as an adult. She wants to hold on to that literal gaze. And I think she thinks children are sort of particularly naturally given to the literal.

**JR:** Uh huh. Is that from a letter?

**AA:** What is that from? It’s from *Mystery and Manners*, but I forget the essay. So she says, she talks about the literal gaze of children in her letters as well. She talks about how actually when she’s writing about that child… do you remember that there’s a convent that has a child, a disfigured child who they believe is a saint who died young.

**JR:** Yeah. Mary Ann.

**AA:** Right. And they wanted her to write the biography. And she talks about that in that letter as well.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah the preface to the — what’s it called? Anyway, the Mary Ann thing that she wrote… that’s collected in *Mystery and Manners*, isn’t it?

**AA:** It is.

**JR:** Man, what a remarkable piece of writing that is.

**AA:** Ah, gorgeous. And actually I realize I’m getting it wrong. That’s the essay where she talks about how agony is given to children in special ways. And that’s what she says at the end when Mr. Head has his revelation. She says that he’s finally experiencing this agony for the first time, but the agony that is given in special ways to children, she says it exactly the same way both in the letter and this story.

So that wasn’t so much about the literal. There was some other place where she talked about… oh, I know! She was discussing “Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and she was saying that the child in there had a literal relationship to the meaning of communion.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AA:** And she says, and so do I.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AA:** It was important to her to associate herself with that child’s gaze, and not distance herself from that as so many adults do.

**JR:** Yeah. That’s great. Alright, we’re getting close to the end of the time that we’ve set aside, so I’ve gotta ask you the question I always ask. Who are the writers who make you want to write, Amy?

**AA:** So, there’s so many. And I’ve heard — cause I listen to some of your podcasts, and I heard that Kate DiCamillo is such a common name that comes up, and I would of course list her. But I wanted to — I was trying to dig into my thinking a little bit. For me, poetry is a huge impetus to write, and one of the poets I absolutely love is Edwin Muir. He writes a lot about poetry. Um… so he has a beautiful poem called “The Brothers” that has had a profound effect on me. Even before I started writing children’s books, I wrote an essay called “The Grave-Merry Girls.” And it has a line that begins it, “In a vision I have seen / my brothers playing on the green.” And I… anyway. His poetry is just amazing.

And then there’s another poet Randall Jarrell who I love. And most people don’t know this, but he wrote four children’s books, and one of them is called *Animal Family*. Have you ever heard of that?

**JR:** No, I don’t know this one.

**AA:** It was this beautiful… it’s actually illustrated by Maurice Sendak.

**JR:** Really.

**AA:** Yeah. It’s a beautiful fairy tale. I think of those two very much. And then *The Children of Green Knowe* by Lucy Boston is… that whole series is… unbelievable. Unbelievably beautiful.

**JR:** Is this a new book or an old book? I don’t know…

**AA:** It’s an old book. And a lot of people — from what I know about you, you would love *The Children of Green Knowe*. It is a story about a little boy that goes to live in this — I forget exactly why he’s there. I haven’t read it in a couple years. But he goes to live in this big — it’s very English — this big old manor. While he’s there, all these mystical things happen. I remember St. Christopher at some point, the statue of St. Christopher, is walking through the garden, and he sees it all happen. It’s beautiful. Anyway.

**JR:** What’s the last word… The Children of Green what?

**AA:** *The Children of Green Knowe*. So knowe is spelled K-N-O-W-E.

**JR:** Huh, okay.

**AA:** Yeah, a lot of people don’t know it, but it’s honestly one of the most beautiful books about children I’ve ever read. So yeah, I’d say those three figures, but really they’re kind of opening up to larger areas of poetry, a certain type of fantasy I think… um, yeah. And I think Kate DiCamillo is very much in that category. She’s not a fantasy writer so much as she is somebody who writes kind of — I would call it magical realism. I don’t know if other people would, but there’s this element of the fantastic that comes in.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah. Which kind of feels like the world where we live, right?

**AA:** Yeah, exactly! Exactly.

**JR:** Where it seems pretty normal, and then every now and then you think, that was pretty fantastical. I didn’t see that coming.

**AA:** Yeah, and I think Flannery O’Connor is in that category as well. Those moments of revelation, that she always spins them out in such a fantastical way in some sense. There’s this thing that’s happening, this vision that’s happening, where you’re seeing something beyond the normal, maybe in a truer way than you saw before.

**JR:** Yeah. I mean, one reason that she’s so important to me — and this is just a happy accident — is just the fact that I grew up in middle Georgia.

**AA:** Yeah…

**JR:** And middle Georgia seems so normal to me. I mean, I like it. You know, I have a lot of fond associations. But it also seems like the most normal place in the world. And then in Flannery O’Connor, that world is this place where Greek myth plays out.

**AA:** That’s beautiful…

**JR:** I mean, just the idea of a peacock strutting around in red clay middle Georgia, to me that’s Flannery O’Connor right there.

**AA:** I’m so glad you said that. That is such a beautiful image. And I think that was what I was trying to get to when I said this strange cast of characters coming together, and this thing that happens that never could have happened. And if I think about my own writing… because I don’t want to stay with picture books. I want to write middle grade novels, and what I’ve done in the past very much is centered in what I would say is the same thing. I grew up in central Pennsylvania. I’d say it’s as normal as anything. But to me, when I write, I always want to… it becomes something else. So, it takes on this transcendent quality, and you find that even within the most normal, within the asphalt blacktop that I would draw on with chalk, you know. And the playground, and all… you know. So, I love it.

**JR:** Yeah. Well, Amy Alznauer, um… that’s um, this was so much fun. I’m so glad we got to spend a little time together. I first heard about your book when I was at Flannery O’Connor’s childhood home, and Shelly Cody there said you know about this book that’s coming out?

**AA:** (laughs)

**JR:** And I said, I did not!

(THEME MUSIC STARTS TO FADE UP)

**JR:** So… but I’m so glad she told me about it. And I’m so glad — I hope a million people read this book.

**AA:** Thank you so much! It was a delight speaking with you.

**JR:** Good. Let’s do it again some other time.

**AA:** Great!

(THEME MUSIC)

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

(JORDY SEARCY SONG STARTS TO PLAY)

(acoustic guitar, male voice singing)
 **JS:** (singing)If you heard a knock on your front door
and all that you found on the porch
Was a pastor that just wanted to be right. **DM:** In The Rabbit Room, we love introducing listeners to independent artists who are doing great work. Artists like Jordy Searcy

(SONG FADES BACK UP)

**JS:** (singing)
‘Cause who could forgive what you did last night?
I’m so sorry for what you heard
We’re broken poets and silly words…

**DM:** A razor sharp songwriter and smooth guitarist with an unmistakeable voice, his performances are dramatic, immersive, and intimate.

(SONG FADES UP)

**JS:** (singing) I’m sorry no one explained Jesus to you…

**DM:** Most recently, he recorded an EP called *Dark in the City*, a succinct meditation on the cultural shifts he observes in his hometown of Nashville, TN

(SONG FADES UP)

**JS:** (singing)
All he wants is you…

**DM:** Go check it out, and visit jordysearcymusic.com

(SONG FADES UP AND OUT)